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*The “thrust of dust”:
A preliminary cognitive approach to the usage of the lexemes dust
and polvere in conventional metaphors*

ABSTRACT: This study presents a preliminary comparative analysis of conventional metaphors retrieved from standard dictionary references associated with the lexemes *dust* (English) and *polvere* (Italian). Employing a cognitive linguistic approach, the paper reflects on the role played by conceptual metaphors in structuring our thinking, with a particular emphasis on the cultural dimension which shapes figurative speech. By conducting an interlinguistic comparison, the study aims to assess whether and how *dust* and *polvere* evoke distinct conceptual associations in the respective languages and cultures. The final remarks serve as a necessary premise for further research on conventional and novel metaphors related to the two lexemes within domain-specific corpora.

KEYWORDS: Conceptual Metaphor, Dust, Polvere, Dictionary Entries, Cognitive Linguistics.

1. Introduction

Both the English and the Italian languages throng with metaphorical references to the words *dust* and *polvere*. Some of these are directly connected to the archetypal biblical narratives, which fundamentally connects dust to the essence of human existence, whereas others float us into other domains. Dust can have magical and otherworldly qualities, it can obfuscate, deceive or enlighten; it is «a multi-material which deals with History, Memory, Humans, Non-Humans and/or the World»¹. The ephemeral presence of dust seeps across languages and meaning, linking our understanding of language and thereby shaping our worldviews and behaviour.

Metaphors shape and reflect cultural values, actively helping us navigate complex ideas and abstract concepts and dust, as a metaphorical source, is particularly powerful due to its inherent properties, namely, its universal ubiquity, its tangible physicality, and its transient nature.

La metafora incarna l'elemento vivente irriducibile a quella rete di correlazioni mediante cui la lingua si organizza e organizza il proprio mondo. Appartiene all'intimo nucleo di memoria, fantasia e ingegno questa capacità di generare uno scarto non previsto tale da costringere l'intero sistema linguistico a riconfigurarsi tenendo conto di quell'incremento (anche sul piano cognitivo). Dal momento che in nessun modo quell'eccedenza può essere riassorbita nell'architettura preesistente, essa induce a formulare aggiustamenti *in itinere* che rendono la lingua stessa un organismo piuttosto che un meccanismo².

Through a preliminary comparative analysis of conventional metaphors related to the lexemes *dust* and *polvere* the study aims to reflect, via a cognitive linguistic approach, on the role played by conceptual metaphors in structuring our thinking, emphasising the role played by the cultural dimension in moulding figurative speech. The research specifically seeks to assess whether and how *dust* and *polvere* evoke distinct associations in the two languages and cultures, thereby mirroring underlying cultural values. According to the cognitive perspective outlined by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), «metaphor is not simply a descriptive device. Rather, it facilitates a means of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, resulting from a mapping between two distinct semantic domains»³. There is an intimate relation between cognitive development, thought and metaphorical language.

It suffices to look at the way children learn their native language. To begin with they lack the capacity to grasp metaphorical language, and it is only when they become “masters of metaphors” that they start to control and move at ease with language, fabricating new meanings out of their experiences and their cultural contexts. The same holds true when learning a new language; the stage when one understands and uses figurative speech is the final one when we have learnt, to say in the words of Giambattista Vico to «menar fuori le forme dalla materia» (bringing forth forms from matter)⁴.

The findings of this preliminary study show a number of asymmetries in the metaphorical realisation across the two languages primarily connected to the morphosyntactic flexibility of English, which condenses the metaphor into compact lexical units (i.e. compound nouns or phrasal verbs), compared to the Italian language which predominantly exhibits a predicative distribution relying on specific verbal collocations to express the same concepts. The outcome of this preliminary reflection serves as the basis for further investigation into the use of metaphors (especially creative ones) related to the two lexemes in domain-specific corpora (i.e., audiovisual content, promotional texts, commercials, or advertisements).

2. Review of the literature

The two main approaches to metaphorical discourse are the rhetorical – which draws from Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Rhetorics* – and the cognitive perspective⁵. According to the rhetorical approach, «metaphor is figurative use of language, the introduction of a strong and vivid expression that can create powerful images and change minds by comparing one thing with another»⁶. According to this principle,

metaphors seem limited to be the replacement of a *verbum proprium* with a *verbum improprium* and a mere tool of embellishment⁷, whereas the cognitive perspective draws from the assumptions that «human beings have the cognitive ability to conceptualise the world in figurative terms. This ability allows them to interpret reality, providing it with structure»⁸.

The cognitive perspective arises from Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), a pioneering work with the merit of having overcome the boundaries of its field of research, expanding it beyond literary studies investigations⁹. In the words of the two scholars, «[o]ur ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature»¹⁰ and metaphors are strictly related to thought and cognitive competence.

Investigating metaphors at a discourse level and not limiting our focus on their catachrestic function – which applies when a *verbum proprium* is missing¹¹ – is certainly more revealing. The cognitive perspective also sheds light on the role played by culture in building up conceptual systems. Each culture possesses a distinct set of conceptual paradigms, and the metaphors by which each culture 'lives' are revelatory. Therefore, an analysis of how specific metaphors are deployed within a language or culture can yield significant insights.

A particularly significant example is provided by Lakoff and Johnson using the conceptual metaphor *time is money*, which is valid within many cultural milieus but *not* all. In Western cultures the conceptual metaphor *time is money* reflects in several ways a post industrialised society; from hourly rates to «paying our debt to society by “serving time” »¹².

Corresponding to the fact that we *act* as if time is a valuable commodity – a limited resource, even money – we *conceive of* time that way. Thus we understand and experience time as the kind of thing that can be spent, wasted, budgeted, invested wisely or poorly, saved, or squandered¹³.

Conceptual metaphors structure the actions we perform because «human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical»¹⁴. Conceptual metaphors operate by mapping an abstract, target domain onto a more concrete source domain and this mapping is not just linguistic; it is structural and systematic.

Although the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor (CTM) is widely recognised as a groundbreaking theoretical approach, further speculation and theoretical expansion based on its insights have highlighted the possibility that the CTM may evolve into a theoretical framework tending toward a transcultural phenomenological experiential perspective. This perspective, critics argue, may lead to the neglect of

cultural variations that ultimately give metaphors their meaning. The greater the cultural distance between languages, the higher the risk of underrepresenting crucial inner cultural variations.

Veronica Koller (2005) claims that Lakoff and Johnson investigate «the origins and structures of metaphor, but not the efforts and purposes of metaphor usage»¹⁵ and this, according to Koller, prevents the method from being applied to complex metaphors in order to evaluate their cognitive force.

In his work on the cultural variations of cognitive metaphors, Zoltán Kövecses (1995) builds upon the universal aspect of metaphors, based on embodiment within the CTM, to place greater emphasis on the issue of cultural variations, by illustrating the conceptual similarities across four different languages (English, Chinese, Japanese, and Hungarian) in the conceptualisation of *anger*, using the ‘anger as container’ metaphor and highlighting the shared perception of human beings as “container of anger”¹⁶.

In their work on the cultural aspects of metaphor and the notion of ‘correlational and intertextual metaphors’, Jorg Zinken, Iina Hellsten, and Brigitte Nerlich (2003) highlight «certain drawbacks of the “standard” theory»¹⁷, namely «the neglect of social and cultural aspects of cognitive activity in the theoretical modelling of metaphors and metaphor use»¹⁸. Zinken et. al. support this view by suggesting that understanding metaphor necessitates integrating two neglected aspects of metaphorical activity – «cultural situatedness of cognition» and «communicative uses of metaphors»¹⁹ – fostering a more nuanced interpretation of metaphorical language in authentic discourse, which is grounded in inherently cultural experiences²⁰.

Didi Li and Daojia Chi (2021) conducted a comparative analysis of emotional metaphors connecting flowers and love in English and Chinese poetry. They concluded that flower metaphors associated to love are «potentially universal or near-universal at a generic level»²¹ despite English and Chinese belonging to different linguistic roots and cultural *milieux*. However, at a more specific level, cross-cultural variations and diversity exist due to «cognitive preferences»²²: whereas the rose is the symbol of love in English poetry, the lotus serves as its equivalent in Chinese poetry.

Also contributing to the study of the cognitive theory of metaphor are Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (1998, 2002) who suggest a quite complex and articulated framework to address the risk of underestimating cultural differences in metaphor construction with their Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT).²³ While the

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) primarily addresses the structure and mapping of pre-existing conceptualisations (like conventional metaphors), the Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) focuses specifically on the dynamic creation of novel meaning through the integration of distinct mental spaces.²⁴

3. Methodology

In adherence to the cognitive approach to metaphors, I have identified three clusters of conceptual metaphors related to the lexemes *dust* and *polvere* in English and Italian and, in order to detect interlinguistic similarities and differences, the analysis then proceeds by examining the figurative language branching out from the core “archetypical” metaphors. Starting from the assumption that conceptual metaphors are tied to our culture, this study aims to detect pragmatic equivalence, or lack thereof, in their use in the English and Italian languages. This data collection was conducted in order to investigate the shared experiential basis of metaphors connected to the lexemes *dust* and *polvere* and assesses how the morphosyntactic structures of the two languages impact the formation of these metaphors. The data were manually collected from dictionary entries, and the analysis was limited to a qualitative assessment of «conventional metaphors»²⁵.

To map the structural differences in metaphor formation across the two languages, the lexicographical research was carried out on monolingual dictionary entries, and online dictionaries of English and Italian idioms were consulted²⁶.

4. Analysis

The lexemes *dust* and *polvere* possess a strong experiential-phenomenological basis and this universal dimension translates into specific metaphorical conceptualisations. By examining the usage of the lexical items *dust* and *polvere* in both English and Italian, we can map conceptual metaphors branching out from these words into three major metaphorical concepts, each conveying specific themes: DUST IS DECAY, DUST CONCEALS OR UNVEILS, DUST IS A SOURCE OF VICTORY OR DEFEAT.

The fact that we conceptualise *dust* and *polvere* with these metaphors influences the way we build language upon these two lexemes as the themes they embody display our attempts to understand what we experience, we see and, most importantly, what we *cannot* see:

Because so many of the concepts that are important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (the emotions, ideas, time, etc.), we need

to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms (spatial orientation, objects, etc.)²⁷.

When seen as decay and symbolic of the impermanence of life, dust acquires a very profound connotation, «becoming an image of negativity, of death»²⁸. When our beloved ones “become dust”, when a human body “turns into dust” – a process accelerated by cremation, which condenses human beings in “a punch of dust” usually contained in valuable urns or even transformed into diamond stones (a more recent trend) – dust becomes what is left of life and the end of it. In this perspective, «Dust is the silence of the verb *to be*»²⁹ and figures of speech related to dust are not only metaphors “we live by” but also metaphors “we die by”.

The following scheme illustrates the Italian metaphor and its corresponding English equivalent, if detected, thereby visually representing the differences and similarities between the two languages.

DUST IS DECAY

Perché sei polvere, e in polvere ritornerai (<i>Genesi</i> 3, 19)	For dust you are and to dust you shall return (<i>Genesis</i> 3: 19)
Cospargersi il capo di polvere	-
Ridurre in polvere	Turn to dust
-	The dust of time

The metaphors listed above are rooted in the biblical reference «memento, homo, quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris» (‘perchè sei polvere, e in polvere ritornerai’/ ‘For dust you are and to dust you shall return’, *Genesis* 3: 19)³⁰. This sentence represents a warning in Christian cultures; it reminds human beings of their destiny and thus their “paucity”. This concept gives rise to the Italian metaphor *cospargersi il capo di polvere* (to scatter dust on one’s head), «manifestazione, nell’antichità, di strazio, di grande dolore, di lutto»³¹, also from biblical origins (see, e.g. *Genesis* 7:6) and is currently and widely used in the Italian language to apologise *ironically* about something. The ontological metaphor *dust is decay* is also used to convey a sense of oblivion and decadence in the expressions *ridurre in polvere/turn to dust*³² and in the English *the dust of time* which relates to oblivion caused by time passing, a metaphor which has no correspondence in the Italian language.

A counternarrative embedded in this ‘limited’ vision of dust seen as decay and finiteness surfaces in the art of Mestriner and Moslemi (2024), who dedicated a work to artistic forms created out of dust³³. They suggest a new paradigm to look

at dust as a continuation, something infinite, thus generating a novel perspective that paves the way for a review of the conceptual paradigm of death, an «aesthetic of immortality»³⁴. In fact, according to the two artists *dust* «[...] is a material that has fallen into a negative atmosphere because of the limits of human perception»³⁵.

Human visual limitations have led to an error of perception that has made dust a symptom of the finiteness of the whole, and it has become an imaginary of death. From modern society, human has tried to escape death and become immortal through various mediums. Looking at dust, it is possible to say that the real immortality is on and in matter, because immortality is the transformation of matter beyond the realm of human language³⁶.

Perhaps because dust transcends human perception, language has fabricated a means of reasoning and speculating about it and the concepts it evokes. The word *polvere* comes from the Latin *pūlvīs -vēris* and it refers to «[m]assa di terra arida, in minutissime particelle incoerenti, che si stende sul suolo e, sollevata facilmente dal vento, si deposita ovunque (si usa, in questa accezione, solo al sing.)»³⁷. The word *dust* holds the same literal meaning, from Old English «fine, dry particles of earth or other matter so light that they can be raised and carried by the wind»³⁸. In its basic meaning, dust entails a series of inherently negative connotations. It commonly refers to a powdered drug in both English and Italian (with the latter adding the adjective white to specifically refer to cocaine). More broadly, dust signifies dirt, contamination, something to be eliminated; «[t]he act of sweeping dust is evocative. It is a matter of cleaning, covering, forgetting and ordering»³⁹. Dust stands in opposition to cleanness and purity, and as such it is perceived as an enemy to be *fought*, to be *captured* and *trapped*.

We do not simply dust our houses, we “start wars” against it using a specific set of arms, ranging from simple cloths and dust repellent sprays to more expensive and sophisticated vacuum cleaners or “flash dust magnets” that boast a 3D fibre designed to “attract, trap, and lock the enemy”. The lexical repertoire associated with dusting is specular in English and Italian, gathering around bellicose metaphors. Verbs such as “attract/attirare-acciuffare” or “trap-lock” clearly pertain to the realm of war, specifically “ambushing the enemy”.

Deleting dust – a “mission impossible” to remain within the warlike jargon, as dust never truly disappears – is consequently associated with restoring order out of chaos⁴⁰. As a source of allergens, dust clearly represents an enemy, for example, to individuals affected by allergies. Following the Industrial revolution, the volume of atmospheric dust increased significantly (by up to twofold), and its composition radically changed, becoming more closely linked to industrial pollution⁴¹. The

removal of dust and dirt, as Giorgia Costanzo highlights in her work, has also led to a “spectacularisation” of the act of cleansing in real TV shows or social media videos⁴² in which we see “soldiers in uniform” entering “wretched houses” to cathartically restore order and hygiene.

Moving from the idea of decay, the physical reality of dust as matter that settles and covers surfaces naturally introduces the second major conceptual metaphor: DUST CONCEALS OR UNVEILS. This dichotomy highlights the dual cognitive function of the lexeme, where dust simultaneously obscures clarity (hiding an object or truth) while also serving as a tangible marker of inattention and the passage of time (revealing the object beneath).

Both English and Italian employ the image of reviving memory by removing dust (e.g. *dust off a language/dare una rispolverata a una lingua*). Furthermore, in English, the action of removing dust also refers to the process of recovering from a negative situation and starting afresh (e.g. *Dust yourself off*). This usage finds a conceptual correspondence in the Italian expression *darsi una ripulita* (meaning to spruce up/to smarten up). Both expressions share the underlying connotation of discarding the past (dust/dirt) in order to move forward.

DUST CONCEALS OR UNVEILS

Rispolverare + qualcosa	Dust off + object
-	Dust yourself off
Nascondere la polvere sotto il tappeto	Sweeping something under the carpet
Alzare un polverone	Kick up a dust/kick up dust/raise a dust or sand Make the dust fly
-	When the dust settles
Polverizzarsi	To dust out
-	Done and dusted
Raccogliere polvere	To gather dust

The conceptual metaphor DUST CONCEALS OR UNVEILS allows for an expansion in Italian with the phrase *nascondere la polvere sotto il tappeto* (to hide dust under the rug), which signifies to hide something or put something away in denial. A similar metaphor in the English language, deletes the word dust to generalise into hiding something under the carpet, «sweeping something under the carpet: to hide (something that is illegal, embarrassing, or wrong) »⁴³. Notably, in Italian, the metaphor tends to be more relatable to the emotional or psychological sphere, referring to something we painfully cannot or do not want to remember, suggesting a deeper connection to denial rather than merely concealing an illegal act.

The metaphors *alzare un polverone*⁴⁴ (to be loud, make people talk about you or provoke disgrace) and *kick up a dust/kick up dust*⁴⁵, *raise a dust or sand*⁴⁶ and *make the dust fly* all refer to the confusion generated by a dust storm and are connected to the act of creating disturbance.

However, a notable asymmetry emerges within this specific cluster of metaphors. The English language, leveraging its morphosyntactic plasticity, has generated a significantly larger number of figurative expressions related to action and movement, as evidenced in the scheme above. This disparity is primarily due to the analytic structure of English, which permits the metaphor to be condensed into a single lexical item, dust, often used as the core of a phrasal verb (i.e. *kick up dust, bite the dust, dust up*). Conversely, Italian typically requires a predicative distribution relying on specific verbal collocations, (e.g., *alzare/ sollevare un polverone*). In American English, the idiom *make the dust fly* also refers to a person who acts energetically and potentially challenges the established order or conventional methods of operation⁴⁷.

The widely known metaphor *when the dust settles*⁴⁸ refers to things calming down after a period of confusion or turmoil. In Italian, an equivalent concept is expressed using a water metaphor, specifically *calmarsi le acque* (for the waters to calm down). Apparently, within the Italian culture the idea of dust “settling down” or “resting” carries no positive connotation. Another interesting metaphor is provided by the verbal structure to *dust out*, used to refer to the act of leaving or departing⁴⁹ which has an equivalent in the Italian language, *polverizzarsi*, which is mostly employed informally to strengthen the illocutionary force of a sentence, signifying a very swift, almost “super-hero style”, departure.

Moreover, the locution *done and dusted*, mostly used in British English,⁵⁰ signifies something completed and set aside to be forgotten, and this also lacks a direct Italian equivalent. A similar Italian concept would be *finire nel dimenticatoio* (to end up in a forgotten place) though this carries a slightly different nuance related primarily to obsolescence and neglect. The metaphor *accumulare polvere* (to gather dust)– «Suffer from total neglect»⁵¹ – is used in Italian language to refer to something, often books or objects, left to gather dust and being neglected.

In the third cluster of conceptual metaphors, DUST IS A SOURCE OF VICTORY OR DEFEAT, the Italian language appears to outnumber English in the quantity of action-related metaphors. This cluster is strongly associated with the realm of war and competition, and Italian dictionary entries reveal a plethora of action verbs

related to *polvere da sparo* (gunpowder), which significantly exceed the number of corresponding metaphors found in English.

DUST IS A SOURCE OF VICTORY OR DEFEAT

Dare/gettare polvere negli occhi	Throw dust in someone’s eyes
Scuotere la polvere di dosso a qualcuno	A dust up
Mangiare la polvere	To eat dust
Mordere la polvere	Bite the dust
Dare la polvere agli avversari	To leave someone in the dust/leave someone for dust
-	Lick the dust
Ridurre in polvere qualcuno	To dust someone
-	To be in the dust
-	Watch my dust
Tenere asciutte le polveri Innescare le polveri Dare fuoco alle polveri Fuoco alle polveri! Sentire odore di polvere/sentire odore di polvere bruciata Non avere mai sentito l’odore delle polveri Avere le polveri bagnate, umide Avere molte polveri da sparare	Keep your powder dry
-	Shake the dust from one’s feet

The word *dust* is particularly fertile when associated with the conceptual metaphor of victory/defeat, be it in a war or in a competition. Metaphorical expressions stemming from this conceptual metaphor generate a systematic way of talking about competition and conflict. When *thrown in the eyes* – «Try to distract from the truth»⁵² – dust misleads, deceives, or perhaps reveals something that was previously unnoticed, essentially providing an altered perspective. Furthermore, dust can occasionally take on magical or otherworldly qualities, something from another realm that can confuse and obfuscate but also enlighten.

The Treccani dictionary entry lists the Italian metaphor *scuotere la polvere di dosso* (to shake the dust off oneself) to refer to the act of beating someone. This metaphor is rare in both languages, and its English equivalent is *to dust his jacket for him* signifying to «Give him a thrashing»⁵³. Conversely, the English verb *to*

dust someone refers to fighting hard against someone or killing them⁵⁴. English also uses the nominal group *a dust up* to indicate a brawl.

Figurative language related to swallowing dust is particularly vivid in both languages, often declined into forms involving eating or biting (*mangiare* or *mordere*). The locution *bite the dust* – made famous by the Queen song *Another One Bites the Dust* – refers not only to being killed into battle but also to being unsuccessful or failing. In Italian, a common metaphor is *far mangiare la polvere* (to make someone eat the dust) generally directed at an adversary and commonly associated with competitions, especially those involving dust and the risk of breathing it (e.g. motorbike/car races). The metaphor *dare la polvere agli avversari* (give the dust to the opponents) refers to winning a competition and distancing adversaries. A similar concept of overtaking an adversary is used in English through the idioms *leave someone in the dust* or *leave someone for dust*⁵⁵. This is analogous to the Italian metaphor *ridurre in polvere* (to pulverise), which means to decisively defeat someone in a competition⁵⁶. The expressions *leave someone in the dust* and *be left in the dust* directly refer to being surpassed by a competitor while the challenging and informal idiom *watch my dust* serves as a warning to the “enemy”⁵⁷. Beyond competitive defeat, such as *eating* and *biting* the dust, American English also employs the poignant metaphor *to lick dust*, which is connected to victory and defeat and means to be humiliated⁵⁸, «Be brought low»⁵⁹.

As previously mentioned, the Italian language actually “leaves English in the dust” when it comes to metaphors associated to *polvere da sparo/gunpowder*. Numerous metaphors belonging to military jargon are currently used in general language, decontextualised from the field of war. Referring to gun powder, the Treccani dictionary mentions *innescare le polveri* (to trigger the powder), *dare fuoco alle polveri* (to give fire to the gunpowders) and *fuoco alle polveri!* (fire to the gunpowder) all used today to stimulate immediate action. The metaphor *sentire odore di polvere* or *polvere bruciata* (to smell dust or burnt dust) is an olfactive metaphor to forecast the possibility of a conflict. Connected to this, *non avere mai sentito l'odore della polvere* (to have never smelled dust) signifies that someone has no warfare experience. The metaphor *avere le polveri bagnate, umide* (to have wet, humid gunpowder) metaphorizes gunpowder unfit for use and is used to say one is unprepared for a conflict. Conversely, *tenere asciutte le polveri* (keep gunpowder dry) means to be ready for battle. This metaphor, as explained in the Treccani, is related to the words reportedly declared by Oliver Cromwell on the eve of the Battle of Dunbar in 1650 «Put your trust in God ... and keep your powder

dry» literally translated with ‘tenete le vostre polveri asciutte’ and since then introduced in the fabric of the Italian figurative language. In English, this same metaphor suggests holding back what you know until the time you might need it, essentially, to wait but remain ready for action.⁶⁰ The metaphor *avere molte polveri da sparare* (to have a lot of gunpowder to shoot) refers to the clever disposal of resources in order to successfully face a battle.

A further key metaphor is “shake the dust from one’s feet”.⁶¹ This locution has biblical origins (*Matthew* 10: 14, *Mark* 6: 11) and signifies leaving in contempt, originally directed at those who rejected the message of the *Gospel*⁶². Although the biblical reference is translated in the Italian Sacred Scriptures as «scuotete la polvere dai vostri piedi», this specific metaphor has not entered the standard Italian figurative speech. The equivalent figurative analogy is conveyed in Italian language by the metaphor *alzare i tacchi* (to lift one’s heels) which focuses more on the speed and decisiveness of the departure⁶³.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The first differences that emerge from the examples provided are at the morphosyntactic level. The flexibility of English permits the frequent uses of the verb *to dust* in constructing figurative speech, whereas the predicative structure of the Italian language necessitates greater lexical dispersion to express equivalent semantic phenomena. The word *dust* in English exhibits an active polysemy, with the meaning of a sentence often modified by prepositions to form phrasal verbs or compound nouns (e.g. *dust off*, *a dust up*, *dust out*). Conversely, the Italian language predominantly relies on specifications provided by the verb (e.g. *alzare un polverone*, *cospargersi il capo di polvere*, *nascondere la polvere sotto il tappeto*, *mordere la polvere*, *fuoco alle polveri*, etc.). The Italian verb *spolverare* possesses a primary semantic field strictly confined to the act of removing dust from an object or a surface. Its functional scope expands in the culinary domain where, when paired with a prepositional phrase specifying an edible substance in a granular form (e.g. flour, cocoa or icing sugar) it denotes the specific act of sprinkling that edible powder onto a dish. The primary metaphorical occurrence is the verb *rispolverare* (e.g. *rispolverare una lingua straniera*), meaning to inject new life into something which was figuratively “covered in dust”.

Despite the apparent typological similarities between the English and Italian languages, an overview of dictionary entries reveals compelling differences in the distribution and nature of active metaphorical fields. English language exhibits a

greater propensity for using metaphors centred on dynamism and action through the deployment of the noun *dust* in verbal or phrasal constructions. This tendency is clear in the productivity of the verb to *dust* in forming kinetic metaphors (e.g., *kick up dust*, *make the dust fly*, *dust out*, *when the dust settles*, etc.). In contrast, as attested by lexical data comparison, Italian language employs a vast metaphorical repertoire derived from military jargon (e.g. *dare fuoco alle polveri*, *fuoco alle polveri*, *avere le polveri bagnate*, *avere molte polveri da sparare*, etc.) currently used in common language. While these metaphors are highly action-oriented, they are historically and semantically specific.

In conclusion, while English exploits *dust* to create generic and verbal metaphors of action, Italian metaphorizes the “call for action” using historically codified metaphors, thus highlighting two distinct strategies for the linguistic conceptualisation of dynamism.

Overall, the varied uses of the words *dust* and *polvere* in both languages exhibit the cognitive “effort” to understand and structure experience through metaphorical language. As Valagussa aptly states, this metaphorical effort constitutes «l’elemento vivente, la brace ardente che cova sotto alla cenere inerte delle configurazioni quotidiane offerte dal linguaggio»⁶⁴. Significantly, the author’s reference to ashes (*cenere*), which is closely related to the concept of *dust*, serves to reinforce the notion of a potent, latent force within everyday linguistic structures.

From this preliminary overview it is clear that both English and Italian cultures attach great value to the ideas conveyed by the words *dust* and *polvere* and the conceptual metaphors used to fabricate language help us reflect on binary concepts like life/death, failure/success, concealment/disclosure. This paper had the aim of looking at the way the two languages in question created conventional metaphors out of a plastic and versatile matter with numerous meanings. To confirm and quantify the cross-linguistic comparison claims stemming from this preliminary lexicographical analysis and to move the comparison beyond simple anecdotal evidence, further research may be directed to a quantitative frequency analysis using linguistic corpora expanding the analysis on novel metaphors within specific genre contexts (e.g., audiovisual, commercials and advertisements), considering also the fact that «conventional metaphors can always be resurrected from their cognitive and social interactive slumber in specific contexts»⁶⁵.

From a cognitive perspective, metaphors help us find patterns, interpret things which are crucial to our existence in the world we live in. In the act of creating or using metaphors, human beings seem to search for patterns, similarly to the

tendency to gaze at random patterns, like mountains, clouds, walls, etc. and “detect” faces, animals, and shapes. This unconscious and spontaneous phenomenon, called *pareidolia* (from the Greek *para*, “beside” and *eidōs*, “images”)⁶⁶, is rooted in our cerebral system; it is “a psychological phenomenon, where the mind responds to a visual stimulus (it can also be a sound) and sees something familiar in a random or ambiguous pattern. This is the brain’s attempt to interpret the images and find a connection where none exists”⁶⁷. It is a phenomenon associated with evolution; it implies the capability to detect an enemy disguised or camouflaged, thus connected to survival of the species⁶⁸. Similarly, the tendency to create metaphors seems to be a cognitive tool to navigate ideas and concepts which may be difficult to grasp. We capture them in figurative speech in the attempt to build a meta discourse around them, define them, control them, restore order out of conceptual chaos.

Dust in its essence was there at the beginning and will be there at the end. It is one of the most powerful concepts in the book of *Genesis* and that importance has allowed it to float and settle in several different linguistic domains, linking something that might seem superficial, on the surface, like dust itself, to concepts that go much deeper and burrow to the roots of European culture.

Note

¹ A. Mestriner, A. Moslemi, *Change of Perspective. Dust as a Structure, Symbolic Form and Environment for New Relationships in a Livable World*, «El Ornitorrinco Tachado», n.18, 2024, Mexico, Uaeméx, pp. 1-25, p. 3.

² F. Valagussa, *Vico. La metafora fa il maggior corpo delle lingue. Menare fuori le forme dalla materia*, «Aisthesis. Pratiche, Linguaggi e Saperi dell’estetico», Vol. VII, n. 2, 2014, pp. 127-142, p. 139, <<https://doaj.org/article/d4d9113770ca43db8d203b80dd9cf89b>> (last access 27/08/2025).

³ S. Nacey, *Metaphors in Learner English*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013, p. 12.

⁴ G. Vico, 1744, in F. Valagussa, *op.cit.*, p. 128.

⁵ On the topic, see also A. Contini, *Metaphor*, «International Lexicon of Aesthetics», Autumn 2018, 30 novembre 2018.

⁶ L. Cameron, *Metaphor in spoken discourse*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by J. P. Gee and M. Handford, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, pp. 342-355, p. 342.

⁷ G. Mosconi, *Sulla metafora*, «Giornale italiano di psicologia», Vol. III, settembre 2023, pp- 549-555, p. 551.

⁸ S. Arduini, *Metaphors Concepts Cognition*, in *Metaphors*, edited by S. Arduini, Roma, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2008, pp. 7-16, p. 8.

⁹ L. Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

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- ¹⁰ G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 3.
- ¹¹ G. Mosconi, *op. cit.*, p. 551.
- ¹² G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁴ Ivi, p. 6.
- ¹⁵ V. Koller, *Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Cognition: Evidence from Business Media Discourse*, «Discourse & Society», Vol. XVI, n. 2, 2005, pp. 199-224, p. 201.
- ¹⁶ Z. Kövecses, *The “Container” Metaphor of Anger in English, Chinese, Japanese and Hungarian*, in *From a Metaphorical Point of View. A Multidisciplinary Approach to the Cognitive Content of Metaphor*, edited by Z. Radman, Berlin and New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1995, pp. 117-145. See also Z. Kövecses, *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*, Cambridge, CUP, 2020; *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation*, Cambridge, CUP, 2005; Z. Kövecses, *Where Metaphors Come From: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor*, Oxford, OUP, 2015; Z. Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2010 (2nd edition),
- ¹⁷ J. Zinken, I. Hellsten, B. Nerlich, *What is “Cultural” about Conceptual Metaphors?*, «International Journal of Communication», Vol. XIII, n. 4, 2003, pp. 5-29, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁹ Ivi, p. 6.
- ²⁰ Ivi, p. 8.
- ²¹ D. Li, D. Chi, *The Universality and Variation of Flower Metaphors for Love in English and Chinese Poems*, «Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education», Vo. XII, n. 9, 2021, pp. 3359-3368, p. 3365.
- ²² Ivi, p. 3366.
- ²³ G. Fauconnier, M. Turner, *Conceptual Integration Networks*, «Cognitive Science», Vol. XXII, n. 2, 1998, pp. 133-187.
- ²⁴ Ivi, p. 135.
- ²⁵ G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
- ²⁶ See, e.g., <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/sentences/dust>; <https://dizionari.corriere.it/dizionario-modi-di-dire/P/polvere.shtml>; <https://italianosemplicemente.com/archives/62900/>>; Oxford English Dictionary (OED); Longman Dictionary of English Idioms; Macmillan Phrasal Verbs Dictionary); Oxford Collocations Dictionary; P. R. Wilkinson, *Thesaurus of Traditional English Metaphors*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uniroma3-ebooks/detail.action?docID=180776>>.
- ²⁷ G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Op. cit.*, p. 115.
- ²⁸ A. Mestriner, A. Moslemi, *Op. cit.*, p. 4.
- ²⁹ Ivi, p. 8.
- ³⁰ To investigate biblical references to the word dust, see <https://www.paoline.it/blog/bibbia/la-polvere.html#:~:text=Simboli%20biblici&text=I%20riferimenti%20alla%20polvere%20nella,%2C%20miseria%2C%20afflizione%20e%20morte>. (last access 26/08/2025).
- ³¹ <<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/polvere/>> (last access 25/08/2025).
- ³² <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/turn-to-dust>> (last access 30/08/2025).

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- ³³ See <<https://blog.smb.museum/dust-is-the-plastic-memory-of-the-world-a-conversati-on-with-alice-ahad/>> (last access 03/12/2025).
- ³⁴ A. Mestriner, A. Moslemi, *Op. cit.*, p. 1.
- ³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 2.
- ³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 6.
- ³⁷ <<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/polvere/>> (last access 30/08/2025).
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- ⁴⁰ On the topic, see G. Costanzo, *Schiume, polveri, saponi: i materiali dell'igiene nell'immaginario pubblicitario*, «EIC Rivista dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Semiotici», anno XVII, n. 38, 2023, Mimesis Edizioni, Milano-Udine, pp. 205-222.
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- ⁴² G. Costanzo, *Op. cit.*, p. 207.
- ⁴³ <[https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sweep%20something%29%20under%20the%20carpet#:~:text=%3A%20to%20hide%20\(something%20that%20is,past%20mistakes%20under%20the%20carpet](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sweep%20something%29%20under%20the%20carpet#:~:text=%3A%20to%20hide%20(something%20that%20is,past%20mistakes%20under%20the%20carpet)> (last access 30/08/2025).
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- ⁴⁵ <<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/dust>; <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/sentences/dust>> (last access 30/08/2025).
- ⁴⁶ P. R. Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 116 (last access 03/12/2025).
- ⁴⁷ <<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/make-the-dust-fly>> (last access 29/08/2025).
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- ⁴⁹ <<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/dust>> (last access 29/08/2025).
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- ⁵¹ P. R. Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 770 (last access 03/12/2025).
- ⁵² P. R. Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 116 (last access 03/12/2025).
- ⁵³ P. R. Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 76 (last access 03/12/2025).
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- ⁵⁶ <<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/dust>> (last access 29/08/2025).
- ⁵⁷ <<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/watch-my-dust>> (last access 29/08/2025).
- ⁵⁸ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/lick-the-dust#google_vignette> (last access 29/08/2025).
- ⁵⁹ P. R. Wilkinson, *Op. cit.*, p. 116 (last access 03/12/2025).
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- ⁶² <<https://www.gotquestions.org/shake-dust-off-feet.html>> (last access 29/08/2025).
- ⁶³ <<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ricerca/alzare-i-tacchi/>> (last access 03/12/2025).
- ⁶⁴ F. Valagussa, *Op. cit.*, p. 139.
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⁶⁶ <<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/pareidolia#:~:text=noun,perception%20of%20faces%20in%20clouds>> (last access 30/08/2025).

⁶⁷ <<https://www.breathemagazine.com/2023/08/09/what-is-pareidolia-and-how-does-it-work/#:~:text=Why%20the%20brain%20is%20wired,the%20fabric%20of%20everyday%20objects>> (last access 31/08/2025).

⁶⁸ <<https://www.ilgiardinodellacultura.com/2020/03/05/la-pareidolia-parte-i-lillusione-nella-percezione-della-realta-e-il-suo-significato-evolutivo/#:~:text=La%20possibilit%C3%A0%20di%20individuare%20un,questo%20intrigante%20oggetto%20di%20studio>> (last access 31/08/2025).

